

St. Columkille

(By E. D.)

Niall of the Nine Hostages, that splendid old Pagan, who harried Gaul and Scotland and aspired to the Roman Empire, little guessed that any descendant of his could eclipse him in fame. Had not his warriors boasted through earth and sea his prowess and his minstrels harped his beauty in the halls? His hair was as "yellow as a soor-archy," says one string-song. Yet Niall was to have a descendant who by the beauty of his soul and by humility above harpers and their minstrelsy was to live in men's minds when the memory of his gold-haired ancestor lay like his mighty body crumbled into dust. This was Columkille, Dove of the Church. From his childhood God set His seal upon his brooding brows. His little companions would call him to come nutting in the woods but he would slip away. Nor would they seek to stay him. "Our Little Dove is praying," they would say. At times he would go with them and sit upon a green bank to watch for otters in the stream, but even at his play his grey eyes were dreamy as if his thought had leapt from stream and otter to a distant land. His parents, gentle souls, hated to part with him. They loved his thoughtful ways and clinging hands. They desired, however, that their dear son should not grow up as heedless and ignorant as the birds so they sent him to a school in Down. At first he was very lonely. He missed his mother and the hills of home. Even the clouds seemed strange and the sun cold. But he soon learned to still his longing and to draw sweetness and knowledge from the great books. The cloister quiet glided then into his heart, and he resolved to leave his father's house with its gold flagons and high doors and to become poor and needy for his soul. Like Patrick he knew the value of knowledge and went from college to college till his ears were filled with wisdom and his eyes with peace. He sat at the feet of St. Finnen and drank his words with reverent look.

Soon he was ordained priest and set out upon his work of teaching the glories of God. One of those who listened eagerly was his cousin, Aedh, that dreaming prince, who wished after for the cloths of heaven. He gave to his gentle kinsman a strip of wooded earth that hung above the flowing Foyle. Here he built the little church that afterwards became like Brigit's oak a refuge for the sick and troubled. Columkille had now grown from a shy child into a noble man, tall as a tree and bright of words. Children and men learned to look for his coming and to court the glance of his grey eye. Like Brigit he wandered the country, founding churches where God should be praised from the rising to the setting sun. Perhaps the most famous of his monasteries was that of Kells where with infinite love and labor was wrought that most exquisite missal, the *Book of Kells*. From all these monasteries monks walked the land in sun and rain teaching the people the triumph of the Cross. Ireland became known as the land of saints and scholars. It was the golden age of

Christianity when the souls of the monks were as white as the stones of Lough Maree.

The desires of Columkille now crossed the sea to Scotland where dwelt a gallant Pagan people called the Picts. At the thought of leaving Ireland his heart was torn, for he loved every town and valley from the Foyle to the Swords. In a broad brown boat he crossed the sea taking with him a few companions. He turned his eyes from the curving shore and fixed them on the wide waters, for he could not bear to look upon the land he left. On the shore of desolate Iona he beached his boat and came to land. Here with his own hands he carried logs and nailed the wood of his little monastery, a mere rude hut, mud-wattled and grey-beamed which was to become the most honored spot in all Scotland. From this small home he went all over northern Scotland from King to Keon converting both to faith in God. Often he lay down on the shaggy wet heath and paid in prayer for his lodging at the Hostelry of the Stars. When over-wearied with wandering he would return to the wooden hut on Iona where were spent his happiest hours. There was in him such a love for all creation that he made friends even with the shining seals on the shore. They would look at him fearlessly with their small brown eye and never attempt to slide away. He spent no time in idleness. If he were not praying in his stall he would be found writing in a missal, or grinding at a quern. In a rare hour he would slip away to the sand-hills where lying in the waving sea-grass he would watch the yellow shadows on the gorse-thorns and feel the south wind blowing in his face. Then his soul-strings would tremble into music and he would sing those Irish hymns exalting God.

St. Columkille lived long upon Iona, long enough to grow weary of the world. His brethren had for him that jealous yearning love that was afterwards shown by the followers of the sweet Assisian. And like St. Francis Columkille despised the comforts of the earth. Well-water in the hollow of his hand was dearer to him than a brimming wine-bowl, and the cobblestones a sweeter pillow than tapestry or skins. He knew by his own weary sighing that his end was come, yet the midnight bell found him kneeling on the cold altar. The dear monk Dermot groped his way to him in the darkness and drew the heavy head on to his breast. The Saint leant upon him wearily but did not cease to mutter prayer. Then the monks hurried up with torches, and when they looked upon his happy face they fell down weeping. At which his face grew bright as sunlight and he raised his feeble hand in blessing and so died. Dermot bore the stately body to his cell and the monks wept till the dawn.

The one grief of Columkille was that he should have died in exile. On his rare visits to Ireland his love for her increased. It is told in all the books of him that one wild day as he walked the beach he saw

batting in from the west a weary crane with feeble breath and battered wing. It shuddered down and fell forspent. He raised it tenderly and smoothed its torn wings. Then turning to a monk he said: "Take this sad bird that fights in from the west, from our love-land. Take it and tend it well until its wings grow strong enough to bear it back to its sweet home." And the monk took the bird into his arms and carried it into his cell and fed its hungry beak with corn. For three days it stayed with them, but on the third it sped straight up as if it sought the sun, then, straining neck and wing towards the west, it flew towards the Irish coast bearing with it the blessing of a Saint.

Another famous story is found in the book of Adamnan, concerning the Saint's parting with the old white horse. On the day before his death Columkille climbed painfully through the rank grass and the sea-daisies to the summit of a little hill overlooking the monastery. Here he prayed and wept above the wooden walls that sheltered his hope for Scotland. His return was very slow and sinking down he took some moments' rest. As he sat still there hobbled up the old white horse whose years were spent in bearing burdens for the monks. It tottered up and laid its head on Columkille's breast and moaned and wept. The attendant between smiles and anger took a stick to cudgel it away. But the old Saint threw away the stick and said: "Strike him not. He loves me. It may even be that God has spoken in his ear and said that I must from him go and from you all. So strike him not!" Adamnan says that Columkille rising blessed the faithful beast and went upon his way.

Columkille has left many a Mass-book to bear witness to his untiring patience and zeal. He has left too, in the Irish tongue, a song of exile which surely even in that land of exiles has never been surpassed:—

"There is a grey eye that looks back towards Erin—a grey eye wet with tears.

While I wander Alban of the Ravens I think on my little oak-grove in Derry. If the tributes and riches of Alban were mine from the centre to the borders I would fling them all away for one small hut in Derry.

Why do I love Derry? For its quietness, its purity, and its flocks of white angels.

How sweet it is to lay thought on Durrow! how sweet would it be to hear through the pine-grove its wind like a ripple of music.

Plentiful is the fruit of the Western Island—dear Erin of the falling waters! and plentiful her oak-trees. Many are her kings and princes: her priests are smooth-throated: her birds have sweet liltings. Her youths are all gentle; her elders have wisdom. Her women are golden and graceful. They each have a clean heart, and the hands of her warriors are noble: their aspect has splendor. There is a grey eye that fills with tears when I look backward to Erin. When I stand on the oaken deck of my boat I strain my look westward o'er the salt sea to Erin.

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